WHAT IS THE VALUE OF YOUR SOUL?

September 11, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
Mark 8:34-37

"What does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" -Mark 8:36 (RSV)

"What shall it profit a man or a woman to gain
the whole world and lose his or her soul?"

The topic this morning is the value of your soul.

Last fall I was part of a seminar in Washington which brought together a group of ministers and government officials who happened to be Presbyterians. There were twelve of us. We were in a van, waiting at the gate of the White House. A Secret Service man asked us for our driver's licenses in order to do a security check. Mine was lost; more accurately, it had been stolen. In any event, all I had on my person with my name on it was a church business card and the church credit card. I tried the business card. The Secret Service man disappeared into his office, returned with security badges - with the licenses clipped on. When he came to me, he said, "Mr. Buchanan, may I talk with you?" Amidst the laughter of my colleagues who were telling him that I was indeed a very real threat to national security, he asked if I didn't have anything which would simply assure them that I was who I claimed to be. Apparently, I had lost more than my wallet... my identity was at stake. So I pulled out the church American Express Card which does have my name on it. He was delighted and relieved. I was approved. American Express got me in the White House - when my word, the assurances of my distinguished colleagues and my employment here - were brushed aside. I'm glad I had not left home without it.

Shortly thereafter, I encountered a John Updike short story entitled The Wallet. It is about Fulham, a retired broker, who "had assembled a nice life - blue-eyed wife still trim and presentable after thirty years of marriage, red-haired daughter off in the world and doing well, handsome white house in the older suburbs."

Fulham spends his time managing his own investments and those of a favored few old clients in an upstairs room. Every morning he goes to his room with the Wall Street Journal, a second cup of decaffeinated

coffee, to make phone calls, look out the window at his neatly manicured lawn, to survey and enjoy the world he has gained.

And then disaster strikes. One morning he can't find his wallet. Now, if you are not an obsessive person you may not understand what this story is about. If you are, if you spend as much time as I do in a state of agitation because you can't find your keys or pen or glasses... you may find it funny and provocative. Fulham looks everywhere: under chairs, beds, he even goes through pockets of suits he hasn't worn for months. He goes a little berserk... His wallet was "a friendly adjunct to his person, a reminder, in its delicate pressure upon his left buttock, of his new stage of life... containing charge cards for Bay Bank, Brooks Brothers, Hertz, Visa, Amoco, American Express, Master Charge, The Harvard Co-op, Massachusetts General Hospital - plus his plasticized driver's license and cards signifying his membership in the Museum of Fine Arts, country club, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, social security and various sentimental mementos and pictures."

After several days of searching, Fulham announces to his wife that someone, obviously, has slipped into the house and stolen his wallet, punctuating his proclamation with obscentities.

His wife says: "I've never seen you like this."

"How am I?"

"You're wild."

"It was my wallet. Everything is in it. Everything. Without that wallet, I'm nothing."

Fulham finds his wallet. In fact, his grandson finds it folded up in a blanket on the couch. And Updike closes with him "squeezing the beloved bent book of leather between his two palms and feeling very grandpaternal, fragile, wiser and ready to die."

"Without that wallet, I'm nothing," Fulham said, Jesus said; "What shall it profit a person to gain the whole world and to lose his or her soul?"

The Greek word is psyche and it means "life" but also "soul" and also "self." In point of fact, it's not your life you are in danger of losing. It's something deeper, more profound, more important, actually. It's your self, that essential core of being inside you, that integrity which if compromised or violated strips you of your soul. We are talking here about soul... as in "Soul food" - food with character and honesty; undiluted, without benefit of artificial color, taste or tenderizers... real food: and as in "soul music" - honest, passionate music, reflective of the human situation; pathos, ecstasy, sensuousness, real music: Symphony Pathetique, Ode to Joy, Adagio for Strings, "I love you, Porgy": and as in "soul brother/sister," that one with whom you relate with no artificiality, no preliminaries, no word games, no manipulation and no posturing. Your soul... that essential authenticity deep inside you which you may be keeping pretty well barricaded and insulated... but which is the place

where you live and move and have being, where your passion and ecstasy and tears and longing all reside. Soul, your soul is the subject and that is what Jesus said is fragile enough that you could lose it in the process of gaining the world, or even a relatively small part of the world.

It is the very heart of Christianity. The common Lectionary is moving through the Gospel according to Mark this fall and we are at the most direct and powerful sequence. Jesus has asked his disciples who they think he is. Peter has answered for them: "You are the Christ." Jesus has told them that he must suffer and die. Peter has argued with that, plainly not understanding who Jesus is. Jesus has rebuked Peter severely, and now this powerful sequence. "If anyone would come after me... deny self... take up a cross and follow. Whoever would save life will lose it. Whoever loses life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit life... lose his or her soul?"

What does it mean to be a Christian? There are different answers even in the New Testament. The Fourth Gospel and St. Paul suggest that it's a matter of believing in Jesus Christ. In Matthew the emphasis is on obeying Jesus' reinterpretation of the law. Luke emphasizes compassion and justice. The symbol of the Gospel of Mark is the lion, "strong, brave, courageous." To be a Christian, for Mark, is to follow Jesus on his costly way to the cross. Nowhere is the Christian claim made with more strength - nor the Christian promise with more eloquence. [see William Willimon, Interpretation, Mark, p. 154,155]

We are asking strong and tough and courageous questions in a renewed way these days. Perhaps the notoriety of the television preachers has embarrassed us into taking our religion more seriously, inspiring us to an inquiry as to what exactly this stuff we say we believe is all about. I am convinced that there is a new integrity and earnestness of spirit alive in our culture. We want substantial religion. We want religion that can assume a place of respectable dialogue in the university. We want a faith capable of conversation with the world about the great issues confronting us. We are embarrassed, resentful in fact, when our faith becomes a caricature, a reactionary bastion of worn-out and irrelevant moralisms.

We're ready for tough, courageous religion - which doesn't hide behind pious gestures and cliches.

We want to know what it means to be a Christian in this wonderful but complex and challenging time, and the power and directness of Mark speaks to our need.

For another thing, we now know that the "new narcissism," the whole gospel of happiness through materialism, acquisition, accumulation, "whoever dies with the most toys wins" is a lie. It doesn't work. It isn't true.

The movie "Wall Street" was not a great motion picture. In many ways it was grossly oversimplified, but it was a two hour commentary on our text this morning. It is about Bud Fox, an aspiring, ambitious young broker and Gordon Gekko, a fabulously wealthy trader. Fox wants what Gekko has, is slowly seduced by the glittering allure of Gekko's life, finally sells out,

does some inside trading, gets rich, loses his soul and then, a little too predictably, gets honest, loses his money but regains his soul.

The point is critical. We have tried to define ourselves in terms of what we earn, buy, accumulate. "Without that wallet, I'm nothing." In the past two decades we have undergone a revolution of the spirit. Altruism has been replaced by greed. Hope has been replaced by resignation masquerading as realism. Twenty years ago this culture was inspired by a noble and good ideal. We could, we believed, build a world in which people were free from racism, poverty, hunger, unnecessary illness, and a world moving in the direction of peace. Twenty years ago, it was neither silly nor uncommon for college students to express their personal hopes for the future in terms of contributing to the general welfare and reconciliation and peace of the country and the world. We know the extent of the revolution that changed that. To continue to believe that the highest and best a person can achieve is to contribute to the healing and wholeness of the world - is, today, to be scorned, dismissed as a naive, do-gooder, worse yet - a "liberal." We put aside the noble dreams and replaced them with a more manageable one - get rich. When young people are asked today - about their hopes, dreams and aspirations for the future - many answer by saying what they hope to earn and own.

The documentation is overwhelming. Even religion, in the age of Narcissism, became intensely individualistic and personalized. The most popular varieties continue to market personal salvation like soap powder and a "hands off" policy about the great societal issues which confront us and which challenge us and make demands of us. But we are emerging - thank God. We are, I believe, being called back to a better and more noble ideology.

What is at stake here is soul, not just the quality of life in our culture. What is at issue is that core of being, that essence of you - which is your soul.

One of the pioneers of modern psychological theory, Eric Erikson, taught that human life can be defined by a series of issues, which each individual must resolve. Erikson said that the crisis of middle adulthood is between "generativity and stagnation." Generativity is "the readiness to care for the next generation" - the willingness to live for a purpose larger than my own life. The danger, Erikson taught, is stagnation. If you don't make that commitment to care for life beyond yourself - either in your own children, or in some way the children who are the next generation - you stagnate. And, said Erikson, you will begin to indulge yourself obsessively - as if you were your own one and only child.

The psychiatrists and psychologists know that the more we give away the more we have. The more we hoard, save, protect and squeeze - the less we have and are. The issue is our own souls.

The heart of Christianity is the teaching of Jesus that in order to live you must love, and in order to love you must die. Put another way, the bold and radical proposal of the Gospel is that learning to love means learning to die. But in that process you gain something infinitely precious - your own soul.

The compelling power of the Gospel is that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, so thoroughly believed it - he lived it out. He so thoroughly loved God and his friends and the world and his own soul, that he died rather than compromise his integrity, his sense of who he was and what his life was about. That's precisely what's going on in the final and most controversial segment of "The Last Temptation of Christ." Jesus of Nazareth embraced this final demand and did not gain the world, a normal life of marriage, family and community, at the cost of his integrity. Some of those people who first heard those words - lived them out and literally gave their lives away rather than compromise their hope and faith. And so, down through the centuries, disciples of Jesus have remembered and bravely lived out the power of his words - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Allen Boesak.

It is a principal for churches. In fact, it is so close to the heart of Christianity that churches forget it only at the risk of their own souls. Churches are Christian, I would propose, only insofar as they learn to live for the sake of others. Successful churches are not those who only minister to their own members and protect their assets, but those who are driven by the truth of the Gospel that you gain life by losing it, by giving it away. If your only and abiding motivation is to preserve and protect, the very soul of the enterprise disappears and the church is already dead, if not yet physically, spiritually; and physically will follow eventually.

Jesus asked simply, "What does it profit if a person gains the whole world and forfeits life?"

The issue is the most precious thing about you... your integrity - your self - your soul. Jesus taught that you will not have it, you will lose it, if the essence of your life is adorning and indulging yourself. Jesus taught that the most effective investment you can make in yourself is to start loving and giving. He meant it, I believe in all seriousness, as a way to live in the world; not just for the religious martyrs - the Bonhoeffers and Kings and Mother Theresas and Desmond Tutus - but for all of us.

Not all can be martyrs. In the common life, many people you and I know live out the truth that you gain life by giving it away. One commentator writes, "The woman who devotes her life to raising children in need of a home, the man whose faithful devotion to a mentally ill wife is quiet and steady, the youth whose civil disobedience for conscience sake leads to prison or exile... these are the countless thousands who, through the centuries and in many contexts, have interpreted the text in their lives." [William Willimon, Interpretation, Mark]

I was deeply moved to read in the Tribune, over my morning coffee last week, about a young man who is foster-parenting a five year old boy with AIDS. The boy's mother was an intravenous drug user who died quickly. The man took on the little boy at the invitation of child welfare authorities when he was three, discovering the world of sunshine and see-saws and swings and fire trucks, but mortally ill. "He is going to die," the doctor said. He hasn't yet. He is thriving. The man lives a double

life, trying to provide secure love, hiding the boy's condition and, of course, living with the reality of his son's death and the possibility of his own illness. He takes the boy to the playground and dabs his playground cuts with Kleenex, risking infection, rather than wearing tell-tale rubber gloves, revealing his little boy's condition and exposing him to the cruelty and bigotry similar children are experiencing elsewhere.

I don't know whether he is an intentional Christian - but he has learned the value of his own soul.

Jesus would say that you haven't valued your own soul - haven't really lived, in fact, until you have loved like that, until you have loved passionately and fully and deeply; loved enough to deny yourself, to forget yourself, to die a little or a lot. Jesus would say that to love deeply is always to die a little to self. If you are blessed you have already begun to learn that... to love a child, another person, a cause, God. To love fully, is to die to self and simultaneously to be yourself, to have life more fully and abundantly than you ever imagined possible.

The heart of Christianity is that at the moment of self-giving you are more yourself, more alive than ever before.

The heart of the Gospel, as Peter and the disciples learned, is that when you have him as Lord and follow him - you know who you are... When you give your life to him, or when you give your life to others; which is always very close to giving your life to him, you are given something back - your identity, yourself, your soul.

In his journal, Henry David Thoreau wrote:

> "All that a man has to say or do that can possibly concern humankind, is in some shape or other, to tell the story of his love - to sing; and, if he is fortunate and keeps alive, he will be forever in love. This alone is to be alive to the extremities."
> [Thoreau's Journal, May 6, 1854]

What is the value of your soul? It is priceless. Protect it. Enhance it. Make it grow. You are not ahead if you gain the world and lose your soul.

You could gain your soul - your very life - if you learned to love enough to die.

Jesus said that. It is the truth.

Amen.